

# Verbal and Nonverbal Diplomatic Communication at the Imperial Court of Constantinople (Fifth–Sixth Centuries)

AUDREY BECKER

In 2009, when she put her arm around Queen Elizabeth, the American first lady Michelle Obama probably did not realize that she had broken with centuries-long protocol that banned touching the queen. But Queen Elizabeth did not look upset, because, fortunately, she herself had been the first to break protocol by putting her own arm around Obama a few seconds earlier. Despite the very strict monarchical protocol at Buckingham Palace, it was possible for Queen Elizabeth to introduce a variation that everyone could understand: she liked Obama. Similarly, centuries earlier in Constantinople, foreign envoys at the imperial court were received according to elaborately codified ceremonies. This protocol is well known in particular for the fifth and sixth centuries, thanks to Peter the Patrician and the excerpts later compiled from his works by Constantine VII Porphyrogenetus,<sup>1</sup> but also thanks to literary sources, such as the panegyric *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*, written by Corippus

in praise of Emperor Justin II,<sup>2</sup> and the *Fragmenta* of Priscus of Panium, Malchus of Philadelphia, and Menander the Guardsman.<sup>3</sup> Limiting the time frames of this essay to the fifth and the sixth centuries will enable us to study the evolution of diplomatic relations between Byzantines and barbarians throughout a particular period of the history of the Byzantine Empire, on the eve of the significant changes of the seventh century.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, military and political events of the

1 Constantine VII Porphyrogenetus, *De ceremoniis aulae byzantinae*, ed. J. J. Reiske, CSHB 16 (Bonn, 1829), 386–433; A. Moffatt and M. Tall, *The Book of Ceremonies*, 2 vols. (Canberra, 2012), 1:386–433, containing Greek text from the CSHB and an English translation; on the fragments of Peter the Patrician in the *Book of Ceremonies*, see C. Sode, “Sammeln und Exzerpieren in der Zeit Konstantins VII. Porphyrogenetos: Zu den Fragmenten des Petros Patrikios im Sogenannten Zeremonienbuch,” in *Encyclopedic Trends in Byzantium?*, ed. P. van Deun and C. Macé (Leuven, 2011), 161–76.

2 Corippus, *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*, ed. J. Partsch, MGH AA 3.2 (Berlin, 1879), 111–56; idem, *Africani Grammatici, Quae Supersunt*, ed. M. Petschenig, Berliner Studien für klassische Philologie und Archäologie 4.2 (Berlin, 1886); idem, *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*, ed. with [English] trans. and comm. A. Cameron (London, 1976); idem, *Éloge de l'empereur Justin II*, ed. and [French] trans. S. Antès (Paris, 2002). In this essay, I follow Antès's edition.

3 R. C. Blockley, ed. and trans., *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus, and Malchus*, 2 vols. (Liverpool, 1981–83); *The History of Menander the Guardsman*, ed. and trans. R. C. Blockley (Liverpool, 1985); Priscus Panita, *Excerpta et fragmenta*, ed. C. Pia (Berlin, 2008). In this essay, I follow Blockley's editions and his numbering system for the fragments of Priscus, Malchus, and Menander. On the different types of sources, see M. McCormick, “Analysing Imperial Ceremonies,” *JÖB* 35 (1985): 1–20.

4 On the reception of foreign ambassadors in later periods, see T. Lounghis, *Les ambassades byzantines en Occident, depuis la fondation des états barbares jusqu'aux Croisades (407–1096)* (Athens, 1980); A. Beihammer, “Strategy of Diplomacy and Ambassadors in Byzantine–Muslim Relations in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries,” in *Ambassadeurs et ambassades au cœur des relations diplomatiques*:

fifth century, and especially of the sixth century, led the Byzantine Empire to reconsider its relations with its barbarian neighbors, including the Huns, Saracens, and Avars.<sup>5</sup> As for the Roman–Sassanian diplomatic exchanges, since the end of the fourth century their intensity grew constantly until reaching a culmination during the reigns of Justinian and Kosrow.<sup>6</sup>

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate how non-verbal communication, in addition to verbal communication, was employed in Constantinople as a key component of the intricate imperial protocol that governed the diplomatic reception of envoys from barbarian kings who were, or became at that time, real diplomatic partners or rivals. Indeed, we can describe nonverbal communication as a tool used by various diplomatic actors to make the diplomatic and political meaning of ritual actions performed during meetings more nuanced without changing the inner ritual structure of these diplomatic receptions.

Philip Buc initiated the debate by suggesting that the sources' descriptions of rituals reveal authorial intent and manipulation for political purposes. Consequently, Buc argues that it is possible to access only representations of the rituals, not the rituals themselves.<sup>7</sup> In the case of barbarian envoys, for example, it

is obvious that Corippus's account of the reception of Avar ambassadors in 565 was quite different from Menander's account. Each attempted to satisfy the expectations of his audience: the imperial court of Emperor Justin II and that of Emperor Maurice, respectively. Divergences in their descriptions of the same event indicate which parts of the reception each writer in his own specific context found important for creating or reinforcing legitimacy. On the other hand, even if the sources consciously made interpretive choices in fashioning their accounts, some aspects of their descriptions could nonetheless reflect what actually happened during diplomatic receptions—especially ritual acts, whose circumstantial details are recurrent.

The issue of the ritual nature of diplomatic receptions has been recently examined by Walter Pohl. He rightly points out that ritual in diplomatic encounters was “only a peripheral element in the historiography of the period.”<sup>8</sup> But that does not mean that the ritual aspect was absent from these encounters, even if the sources were not particularly interested in it. For instance, Peter the Patrician, drawing on an account of one of the many embassies of Isdigousnas in Constantinople, explained (in what can be called a prescriptive model) “what is necessary to observe when a senior ambassador of the Persians comes.”<sup>9</sup> At the

Rome, *Occident Médiéval, Byzance*, ed. A. Becker and N. Drocourt (Metz, 2012), 371–400; N. Drocourt, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore: Les ambassadeurs étrangers dans l'Empire byzantin des années 640 à 1204*, 2 vols. (Liege, 2015).

5 In this essay, the inner imperial diplomacy is left aside. In descriptions of imperial receptions of domestic petitioners, the issue of nonverbal communication is quite different, especially when those petitioners were bishops or monks; H. Leppin, “Power from Humility: Justinian and the Religious Authority of Monks,” in *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity*, ed. A. Cain and N. Lenski (Burlington, VT, 2009), 155–64; C. Kelly, “Stooping to Conquer: The Power of Imperial Humility,” in *Theodosius II: Rethinking the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity*, ed. Kelly (Cambridge, 2013), 221–43, at 234–38.

6 M. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth* (Berkeley, 2009), 127–44; T. Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London, 2009), 28–30.

7 P. Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, 2001); idem, “Ritual politique et imaginaire politique au Haut Moyen Âge,” *RH* 620 (2001): 843–83; idem, “The Monster and the Critics: A Ritual Reply,” *EME* 16 (2007): 441–52. For a response to Buc, see G. Koziol, “Review Article: The Dangers of Polemics: Is Ritual Still an Interesting Topic of Historical Study?,” *EME* 11 (2002): 367–88; see also C. Pössel, “The Magic of Early Medieval Ritual,” *EME* 17 (2009): 111–25.

8 W. Pohl, “Ritualized Encounters: Late Roman Diplomacy and the Barbarians, Fifth–Sixth Century,” in *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean*, ed. A. Beihammer, S. Constantinou, and M. Parani (Leiden, 2013), 67–86, at 86.

9 *De cer.* 398.14 (CSHB 16:398): “Ὅσα δὲ παραφυλάττειν, πρεσβευτοῦ μεγάλου ἐρχομένου Περσῶν; trans. Moffatt and Tall, *The Book of Ceremonies*, 398. E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas Empire*, vol. 1, *De l'État romain à l'État byzantin* (Paris, 1949), 510 n. 2, thinks that this description fits with the second embassy of Isdigousnas to the imperial court in the years 550–51; P. Antonopoulos, *Ὁ αυτοκράτορας Κωνσταντῖνος Ζ' Πορφυρογέννητος καὶ οἱ Οὐγγροὶ* (Athens, 1990), 203–4, is of the opinion that it was the third embassy of Isdigousnas in the years 556–57. F. Tinnefeld, “Ceremonies for Foreign Ambassadors at the Court of Byzantium and Their Political Background,” *ByzF* 19 (1993): 193–214, at 195, and K. Stock, “Yazdān–Friy–Šāpūr, ein Grossgesandter Šāpūrs III: Ein Beitrag zur persisch–römischen Diplomatie und Diplomatik,” *Studia Iranica* 7 (1978): 165–82, at 167, both assign it to the first embassy in 547; for A. Gillett, *Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411–533* (Cambridge, 2003), 225, Peter the Patrician's account is a composite of all Isdigousnas's visits. On Isdigousnas see *PLRE* 3:722–23; G. Greatrex and N. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, part 2, *AD 363–630: A Narrative Sourcebook* (London, 2002), 275 n. 6; P. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the*

same time, in describing the various specific stages of this kind of imperial reception,<sup>10</sup> he obviously expected his readers to be well informed about its the general framework.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, this account does show that the reception in the consistory was clearly organized around some very highly ritualistic acts: the proskynesis, the kiss to the feet of the emperor, the gift-giving exchange.<sup>12</sup>

In my analysis, I use the notion of “ritual act” as defined in the heuristic model of Axel Michaels:

the framed and structured performance of formalized, that is, repetitive, in principle public and variable, action(s) or enactments in variable, intense modes with individually or socially elevating implications or qualities that transform or confirm the identity, role, status, or authority of participants and social groups.<sup>13</sup>

While it is impossible to give a precise and universal anthropological definition of what a ritual is,<sup>14</sup> applying a heuristic model to the sources can help uncover meanings hidden behind or beneath the words and thus overcome the narrative strategies of the sources. From this perspective, the elements of the

nonverbal communication in the diplomatic protocol in Constantinople can be studied as a means of reinforcing imperial hegemony via the use of ritual structure.

### Imperial Nonverbal Communication in the Diplomatic Protocol

During diplomatic receptions at the imperial court, nonverbal communication could work alongside verbal communication or could even precede it. In order to highlight the emperor’s power, the performance of diplomatic protocol relied on symbolic and intentional communication using wordless signal systems that had to be socially shared to enable information to be transmitted between sender and receiver.<sup>15</sup> Even though this social construction of nonverbal communication in rhetoric was already at the heart of Cicero’s concerns in his treatise *De officiis* and was taken up four centuries later by Ambrose in his work of the same title,<sup>16</sup> the issue became crucial when the Romans had to face the

*Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian–Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London, 2008), 101–3, 118–22.

10 *De cer.* 398–410 (CSHB 16:398–410); Canepa, *Two Eyes*, 130–38; E. Nechaeva, *Embassies—Negotiations—Gifts: Systems of East Roman Diplomacy in Late Antiquity* (Stuttgart, 2014), 36–42.

11 For instance *De cer.* 404.19 (CSHB 16:404); on this point see McCormick, *Ceremonies*, 8–9.

12 *De cer.* 406.6–12 (CSHB 16:406).

13 A. Michaels, *Homo ritualis: Hindu Ritual and Its Significance for Ritual Theory* (Oxford, 2016), 32, a definition very close to that given by D. I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven, 1988), 9–12. Providing a complete overview of anthropologists’ definitions of ritual is beyond the scope of this essay: for a comprehensive review of recent trends, see Michaels, *Homo ritualis*, 10–14, 19–21; for a comprehensive review of anthropological theories used by historians of the Middle Ages, see A. Beihammer, “Comparative Approaches to the Ritual World of the Medieval Mediterranean,” in Beihammer, Constantinou, and Parani, *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power*, 1–33.

14 G. Althoff, “The Variability of Rituals in the Middle Ages,” in *Medieval Concepts of the Past*, ed. Althoff, J. Fried, and P. Geary (Cambridge, 2002), 71–87, at 71–73; D. Handelman, “Conceptual Alternatives to ‘Ritual,’” in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. J. Kreinath, J. Snoek, and M. Stausberg (Leiden, 2006), 37–49; Michaels, *Homo ritualis*, 10.

15 R. Buck and C. A. Van Lear, “Verbal and Nonverbal Communication: Distinguishing Symbolic, Spontaneous, and Pseudo-Spontaneous Nonverbal Behavior,” *Journal of Communication* 52 (2002): 522–41; N. J. Moore, M. Hickson, and D. Stacks, *Nonverbal Communication* (New York, 2014). Nonverbal communication was initially described and theorized in the 1950s by the anthropologist Edward Hall, who was the first to analyze its social dimension—especially the use of space/distance (*proxemics*) and of time; see E. T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Greenwich, CT, 1959) and *The Hidden Dimension* (New York, 1966); see also A. Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Communication* (Chicago, 1972); R. A. Hinde, ed., *Non-verbal Communication* (Cambridge, 1972); M. R. Key, ed., *The Relationship of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication* (The Hague, 1980).

16 Cic., *Off.* 1.126–132; Amb., *Off.* 1.67–89; on nonverbal communication by Cicero, see also Cic., *De or.* 3.216; Cic., *Orat.* 55, 59, 60, 89. On nonverbal communication and rhetoric in classical works, see R. F. Newbold, “Nonverbal Communication and Parataxis in Late Antiquity,” *AntCl* 55 (1986): 223–44; J. C. Schmitt, *La raison des gestes dans l’Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1990), 33–55; F. Graf, “Gestures and Conventions: The Gestures of Roman Actors and Orators,” in *A Cultural History of Gesture*, ed. J. Bremner and H. Roodenburg (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 36–58; G. S. Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore, 1999); D. Lateiner, “Proxemic and Chronemic in Homeric Epic: Time and Space in Heroic Social Interaction,” *Classical World* 98 (2005): 413–21; T. Fögen, “*Sermo corporis*: Ancient Reflections on *gestus*, *vultus* and *vox*,” in *Bodies and Boundaries in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Fögen and M. M. Lee (Berlin, 2009), 15–43.

challenge of diplomatic relations with political groups whose culture was very different.<sup>17</sup>

At the imperial court of Constantinople, the use of space and distance—what anthropologists call “proxemics”—was a critical aspect of nonverbal communication.<sup>18</sup> This spatial effect was in play, for instance, when the ambassador crossed from the Chalke Gate to the Consistorium. He and his retinue would have to advance through the *scholae palatinae*, a journey that had the aim of impressing and reminding them of the emperor’s power. Then, once in the Consistorium, the embassy was literally surrounded by senators and imperial advisors. The Consistorium thereby became the spatial framework for the performance of diplomacy. On the one hand, its perfect organization would very clearly show the imperial *taxis* that reflected the divine hierarchy.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the performance would also reveal, through a dialectical movement, its very antithesis: the Avar *ataxia*, in Corippus’s account, defeated by the emperor. The physically elevated position of his throne also reminded ambassadors of the emperor’s preeminent power. Corippus described this very well in a comparison of Avar envoys in the Consistorium to Hyrcanian tigers in the circus arena:

They shuddered at the sight of the lances and cruel axes and saw the other wonders of the noble procession. And they believed that the Roman palace was another heaven. They rejoiced to be stared at and to appear carefree

17 Note that the Foreign Service Institute wanted Edward Hall to teach diplomats how to communicate effectively with individuals from foreign cultures, a challenge not fundamentally different from the one with which foreign ambassadors arriving at the imperial court in Constantinople had to grapple.

18 For the definition of proxemics, see Hall, *Hidden Dimension*, 1; on the use of space in imperial ceremonies in the Great Palace during the tenth century, see M. Featherstone, “Space and Ceremony in the Great Palace of Constantinople under the Macedonian Emperors,” in *Le corti nell’alto medioevo*, Settimane di studio della Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull’alto Medioevo 62 (Spoleto, 2015), 587–607; on the use of space in imperial ceremonies during the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, see R. Macrides, “After the Macedonians: Ceremonial and Space in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,” in *ibid.*, 611–24.

19 On this question see Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Cael. Hier.* 3.1–2; on *taxis* see H. Ahrweiler, *L’idéologie politique de l’Empire byzantin* (Paris, 1975); M. F. Auzépy, “Les aspects matériels de la *taxis* byzantine,” *Bulletin du Centre de recherche du château de Versailles* 2005 (online journal: <https://doi.org/10.4000/crcv.2253>).

as they entered: as Hyrcanian tigers when New Rome gives spectacles to her people, under the direction of their trainer do not roar with their usual savagery but enter, go all around the edge, and look up at the circus full of thousands of people, and by their great fear learn gentleness: they lay down their fury and are happy to wear the cruel chains, to come right into the middle, and they love in their pride the very fact that they are stared at. Their eyes range over the benches and the enthusiastic crowds and they lie down in adoration before the throne of the emperor.<sup>20</sup>

This passage from Corippus is evidence that during the diplomatic reception, the performance consciously used both spatial organization and the positions of the various actors, all with the aim of creating a specific spatial framework in which ritual acts during diplomatic encounters would take place.<sup>21</sup> On this level, the envoy’s receiving of the official letter that summoned him to appear at the *silentium* was a first turning point: it announced the imperial decision to perform the diplomatic protocol during a specific time in a symbolic ritual space, the Consistorium, dedicated to this purpose.<sup>22</sup> On another level, the performance is a means to emphasize imperial power. Bodily movements were also used for the same purpose. Bodily signs were clearly asymmetrical; while the emperor stood motionless, the Avar envoys alone moved in order to perform the ritual of obeisance: proskynesis, or kissing the imperial feet.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, ceremonial

20 Corippus, *In laud. Iust.* 3.242–54: *Horrescunt lanceas saevasque instare secures / ceteraque egregiae spectant miracula pompae / et credunt aliud Romana palatia caelum. / Spectari gaudent hilaresque intrare uideri: / non secus Hyrcanae quotiens spectacula tigris / dat populis noua Roma suis, ductore magistro / non solita feritate fremunt, sed margine toto / intrantes plenum populorum milia circum / suspiciunt magnoque metu mitescere discunt, / deponunt rabiem, gaudent fera uincla subire, / per medios intrare locos ipsum que superbae / quod spectantur amant, caueam turbasque fauentes / lustrant et pronaе solium regnantis adorant.* Trans. Cameron, *In laudem Iustini* (n. 2 above), 107.

21 P. Boyer and P. Liénard, “Whence Collective Rituals? A Cultural Selection Model of Ritualized Behavior,” *American Anthropologist* 108 (2006): 814–27, at 817.

22 *De cer.* 403.17–404.2 (CSHB 16:403–4).

23 O. Treitinger, *Die oströmische Kaiser- und Reichsidee nach ihrer Gestaltung im höfischen Zeremoniell: Vom oströmischen Staats- und*



and holy silence—what Otto Treitinger called *zere-monielle* and *heilige Schweigen*—was the rule.<sup>24</sup> In this way, staying motionless and silent, the emperor would become a “living icon,” transformed, together with his court, into an image of the transcendental world: Christ’s court in heaven.<sup>25</sup>

From the perspective of diplomacy, however, silence not only had religious implications but also was an instrument of power, since the emperor was the only one who was allowed to initiate verbal communication.<sup>26</sup> As a matter of fact, diplomatic reception could be defined as both nondialectical and nondialogical, because the ambassadors could transgress neither the spatial nor the symbolic distance between them and the emperor; nor could they initiate anything in this relationship (if one could refer to it as a “relationship”) with the emperor.<sup>27</sup> For instance, in

*Reichsgedanken* (Jena, 1938), 84–93; A. Alföldi, “Die Ausgestaltung des monarchischen Zeremoniells am römischen Kaiserhofe,” *MDAIRA* 49 (1934): 1–118, at 25–73; G. Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter: Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt, 1997), 202–3; C. F. Pazdernik, “Paying Attention to the Men behind the Curtain,” in Fögen and Lee, *Bodies and Boundaries in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 63–85; D. Zakharine, “Medieval Perspectives in Europe: Oral Culture and Bodily Practices,” in *Body, Language, Communication: An International Handbook on Multimodality in Human Interaction*, ed. C. Müller, E. Fricke, A. Cienki, and D. McNeill (Berlin, 2013), 343–63.

24 Treitinger, *Die oströmische Kaiser- und Reichsidee*, 52–54. On the office of the *silentiarii*, whose importance increased from the end of the fifth century, see R. Delmaire, *Les institutions du Bas-Empire romain de Constantin à Justinien: Les institutions civiles palatines* (Paris, 1995), 38–43.

25 J. A. Francis, “Living Icons: Tracing a Motif in Verbal and Visual Representation from the Second to Fourth Centuries C.E.,” *AJP* 124 (2003): 575–600; for the interactions between the imperial court and the heavenly court, see H. Maguire, “The Heavenly Court,” in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. Maguire (Washington, DC, 1997), 247–58; for a similar use of silence at the Sassanian court, see Canepa, *Two Eyes* (n. 6 above), 144–46.

26 Zakharine, “Medieval Perspectives in Europe,” 354; S. Bertelli, *The King’s Body: The Sacred Rituals of Power in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (University Park, PA, 2001).

27 For a definition of dialogical and dialectical relations, see R. Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures, and Politics of Cooperation* (New Haven, 2012), 18–20; on the symbolic struggle to impose a legitimate vision of the world, see P. Bourdieu, “Espace social et genèse des ‘classes,’” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 52 (1984): 3–14, at 5–7; also Kertzer, *Ritual* (n. 13 above), 77–101. More generally, on language as a tool for symbolic power, see P. Bourdieu, “Les rites comme actes d’institution,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 43 (1982): 58–63.

568, when Justin II received the Persian envoy Mebod, he did not allow him to explain the purpose of his mission.<sup>28</sup> And by deciding when the envoy would speak, the emperor also controlled the chronemics—that is, the precise timing of diplomatic performance.<sup>29</sup> The emperor decided when the envoys could enter the Consistorium, when the *velum* should be raised, and, most importantly, when the ambassadors were allowed to stand up after kissing his feet.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the more he played with chronemics, the more he fostered an imbalance in his relationship with the ambassadors, before having said anything. But controlling the timing of the reception also meant controlling the timing of the proskynesis, a ritual act that was another turning point.<sup>31</sup> By making this gesture of respect, the ambassador publicly recognized the political legitimacy of the emperor. And, in a double instituting rite, by allowing the ambassador to stand up the emperor recognized the ambassador’s legitimacy.<sup>32</sup> Breaking the silence and starting a dialogue meant, again, that the emperor and the ambassador were symbolically in the same transformed reality.

It should be noted that the same determination to impress the ambassadors, even more elaborately, can be seen in *De ceremoniis*’s description of the reception of foreign envoys in the Magnaura in the tenth century.<sup>33</sup> There envoys were surrounded by the dignitaries of the emperor’s court, as in Corippus’s description, and the throne, called “the throne of Solomon,”

28 Menander Protector, frag. 9.3.35–40.

29 On the anthropological definition of “chronemics,” see T. J. Bruneau, “Chronemics and the Verbal–Nonverbal Interface,” in Key, *The Relationship of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication* (n. 15 above), 101–19.

30 Corippus, *In laud. Iust.* 3.264–66.

31 Canepa, *Two Eyes*, 138.

32 Bourdieu, “Les rites comme actes d’institution,” 60; M. Abélès, “Mises en scène et rituels politiques: Une approche critique,” *Hermès* 8–9 (1990): 241–59, at 244.

33 *De cer.* 566.11–570.10 (CSHB 16:566–70); N. Drocourt, “Christian–Muslim Diplomatic Relations: An Overview of the Main Sources and Themes of Encounter (600–1000),” in *Christian–Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, vol. 2, 900–1050, ed. D. Thomas and A. Malett (Leiden, 2010), 29–72, at 63–64; M. Featherstone, “Δι’ ἐνδοξίου: Display in Court Ceremonial (*De ceremoniis* II,15),” in *The Material and the Ideal: Essays in Medieval Art and Archaeology in Honour of Jean-Michel Spieser*, ed. A. Cutler and A. Papaconstantinou (Leiden, 2007), 75–112; Drocourt, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* (n. 4 above), 494–502.

was elevated.<sup>34</sup> In addition, *De ceremoniis* describes the use of church choristers from Hagia Sophia and Holy Apostles, organs, and mechanical devices—automata such as roaring lions or singing birds in a tree—placed around the throne with the purpose of further impressing the envoys by delighting them, not just by causing fear.<sup>35</sup> Liutprand of Cremona had the same experience when he came to the Great Palace in 949 as an envoy of Berengar II, although he claimed to not have been impressed. Yet there was a major change: the envoys no longer had an opportunity to talk with the emperor, whose words were totally mediated.<sup>36</sup> Liutprand mentioned that he never spoke to the emperor during the reception but only with the logothete of the Course.<sup>37</sup> Already in the eighth century, ‘Umāra b. Hamza, the ‘Abbāsīd envoy of Al-Mansūr, was first frightened and then amazed by the automata.<sup>38</sup> And in 860 Nasr ibn al-Azhar, Caliph al-Mutawakkil’s envoy to Emperor Michel III, pointed out that he never heard the emperor’s voice during his four-month stay in Constantinople. His main interlocutor was Empress Theodora’s brother Bardas, “who was in charge of the affairs of the realm.”<sup>39</sup> Bardas even swore in the name of the emperor, who just nodded.<sup>40</sup> Even if the ritual structure of the reception

did not change much, its meaning had changed. Being permanently a perfect image of God, the emperor was now inaccessible even after the ritual of proskynesis.<sup>41</sup> He stood so far beyond the viewers that they were never in the same, even symbolically transformed, reality. No longer part of a dialectical ritual of recognition, performing the proskynesis had become a one-sided gesture recognizing the emperor’s divinity: thus, it now highlighted the impossibility of any dialogue by acknowledging immovable symbolic boundaries around the emperor, who stood in a kind of permanent liminality.<sup>42</sup>



To get back to the fifth and sixth centuries, the sources show that as the dialogue with the ambassador started, the emperor would use paralinguistic features—that is, elements of nonverbal communication that include all the spoken aspects except words themselves.<sup>43</sup> Pitch, rate, volume, and even silence were among the vocal cues used at the same time by the emperor to emphasize what he was saying. This was the case in 568 when the Persian ambassador Mebod tried to persuade Emperor Justin II to grant an audience to the Saracen envoy and his retinue. The emperor’s reaction was reported by Menander the Guardsman.<sup>44</sup> Justin first

34 *De cer.* 566.12–14 (CSHB 16:566): “Ὅσα δεῖ παραφυλάττειν, δοχῆς γενομένης ἐν τῷ μεγάλῳ τρικλίνῳ τῆς μανναύρας, τῶν δεσποτῶν καθεζομένων ἐπὶ τοῦ Σολομωντείου θρόνου;” “All that must be observed when a reception is held in the Great Triklinos of the Magnaura, when the emperors sit on the throne of Solomon.” Also *De cer.* 567.9; 570.17; 583.18–19 (CSHB 16:567, 570, 583); for a description of the throne of Solomon in the Old Testament, see 1 Kgs (3 Kgdms) 10:18–25; G. Dagron, “Trônes pour un empereur,” in *Byzantium: State and Society, in Memory of Nikos Oikonomides*, ed. A. Avramea, A. Laiou, and E. Chrysos (Athens, 2003), 179–203.

35 *De cer.* 568.17–569.16; 583.20–21 (CSHB 16:568–69, 583).

36 Furthermore, according to the *De ceremoniis*, it seems that three proskyneses and the kiss of the imperial feet mentioned by Peter the Patrician were replaced by just one proskynesis.

37 Thirty years later, al-Bāqillānī, sent by ‘Adud al-Dawla in 980, said that the emperor Basil remained silent during diplomatic receptions; M. T. Mansouri, “Les musulmans à Byzance (VII<sup>e</sup>–XI<sup>e</sup> s.),” *Graeco-Arabica* 7–8 (1999–2000): 379–94, at 391; idem, “Byzantium and the Arabs from the VIIth to XIth Century,” *Mediterranean World* 20 (2010): 57–68, at 65.

38 A. Beihammer, *Nachrichten zum byzantinischen Urkundenwesen in arabischen Quellen: 565–811* (Bonn, 2000), no. 340.

39 Tabarī, *Hist.* 3:1449 (trans. J. Kraemer, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 34 [New York, 1989], 168).

40 Tabarī, *Hist.* 3:1451: “They accepted my request for a mutual oath. I asked that the emperor’s maternal uncle swear, whereupon he

did so on behalf of Michael. I said, ‘O king, your maternal uncle has sworn an oath to me. Does this oath bind you?’ He responded affirmatively with a nod. I did not hear him utter a word from the time I entered Byzantine territory until I left” (trans. Kraemer, *History of al-Ṭabarī*, 169).

41 The Eusebian reminiscence of the idea of a divine legitimacy to rule is worth emphasizing; P. Maraval, *La théologie politique de l’Empire chrétien: Louanges de Constantin—Triakontaétérikos* (Paris, 2001), 49–58.

42 V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, 1969), 95, defines liminal individuals as “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony.”

43 Moore, Hickson, and Stacks, *Nonverbal Communication* (n. 15 above), 237–42.

44 Menander was clearly interested in diplomacy and he was aware of the issue of balance of power. His use of archival documents made the facts he reported reliable even if his interpretation of the facts depended on his worldview; Blockley, *Menander* (n. 3 above), 18–20; M. R. Cataudella, “Historiography in the East,” in *Greek and Roman Historiography in Late Antiquity, Fourth to Sixth Century A.D.*, ed. G. Marasco (Leiden, 2003), 391–447, at 422–29. Cf. B. Baldwin, “Menander Protector,” *DOP* 32 (1978): 99–125, for whom Menander is not reliable.

answered sarcastically and the Persian envoy, upset by this sarcasm, withdrew immediately after saluting the emperor. Mebod was no doubt thrown into confusion by this reception, for in contrast Justinian had received his predecessor Isdigousnas “not simply as an envoy, but counted him worthy of much more friendly attention and magnificence.”<sup>45</sup>

Mebod repeated his request a few days later, but this time the emperor became so angry that the unfortunate ambassador panicked, threw himself face down on the floor, and pretended that he had said nothing. Then the emperor, who had flown into a fury because he did not want to receive the Saracens, seemed to calm down almost instantly and proclaimed “in a gentler manner,” according to Menander, that Mebod’s request must have been mistranslated. In Menander’s view, the emperor’s behavior was staged and not at all spontaneous.<sup>46</sup> The successive changes in vocal inflection, volume, and pace during the emperor’s fury and its aftermath were premeditated and had a specific purpose: to emphasize the emperor’s words. And apparently the ploy worked: Mebod was so shocked by the emperor’s reaction that not only did he stop talking to the emperor about the Saracen envoys, but he even cursed them.<sup>47</sup>

According to Menander, this was very much an example of intentional manipulation by the emperor, who, like an actor, consciously used pseudo-spontaneous displays as a tool: for the ambassadors believed they were seeing genuine outpourings of an emotional state and not at all some kind of intentional communication.<sup>48</sup> In this way, the emperor would try to manipulate the emotions of ambassadors. Conversely, the anger of Valentinian against the Quadi’s ambassadors in 375 was

not pretended and it ended up killing the emperor, who burst a blood vessel.<sup>49</sup>

It is important to note the difference between Menander’s narrative account and Corippus’s rhetoric in his panegyric to Justin—in which he described the emperor’s continued impassivity in 565 when he answered the speech of the Avar ambassadors: “The tranquil emperor was not moved in anger, and looked at the young man as he made these boasts with eyes peaceful with piety, and said this in calm speech.”<sup>50</sup>

Texts by Menander the Guardsman and Corippus demonstrate the ways in which the sources instrumentalize their descriptions of the rituals. By emphasizing Justin’s reaction as being unwilling to make any concessions, Menander’s purpose was to praise Emperor Maurice’s policies and his own intransigence; Corippus’s purpose was to describe how an emperor was supposed to act to be seen as legitimate. From the perspective of internal policy, the emperor was the representative of the Christian God on Earth, and the panegyrists had to portray him as a perfect divine image. Therefore, when Corippus described the emperor’s behavior during the diplomatic reception, reality was irrelevant.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, his *panegyricus* pointed out the importance of the spatial and temporal aspects of this idealized diplomatic encounter by emphasizing them.

## Nonverbal Communication and Internal Political Purposes

Emperors used the presence of foreign envoys for internal political purposes, aimed foremost at the citizenry of the imperial city. Indeed, one could also consider diplomatic protocol a ritual intended to continually reinforce this group’s original and fundamental loyalty

45 Procopius, *Wars* 8.11.7: . . . οὐ κατὰ πρεσβευτήν, ἀλλὰ πολλῶ ἔτι μᾶλλον φιλοφροσύνης τε καὶ μεγαλοπρεπείας ἡξίωσε; *History of the Wars*, trans. H. B. Dewing, vol. 5, Loeb 217 (Cambridge, MA–London, 1928), 150 (Greek text), 151 (translation). See also Malchus, frag. 17: δεξάμενος δὲ αὐτοὺς φιλοφρόνως ὁ Ζήνων τιμῆς μὲν ἡξίωσε δεούσης τοὺς πρέσβεις; “Zeno received the envoys [of Huneric] in a friendly manner, bestowed upon them the honors due to ambassadors” (trans. Blockley, *Fragmentary Historians*, 427).

46 Menander Protector, frags. 9.3.90–97, 116–18.

47 Menander Protector, frag. 9.3.99–101.

48 See Buck and VanLear, “Verbal and Nonverbal Communication” (n. 15 above), 526–27.

49 Amm., 30.6.30; B. Sidwell, *The Portrayal and Role of Anger in the Res Gestae of Ammianus Marcellinus* (Piscataway, NJ, 2010), 174–76.

50 Corippus, *In laud. Iust.* 3.308–10: *Talia iactantem, nulla comotus in ira, / tranquillius princeps oculis pietate serenīs / aspexit iuuenem placidoque haec edidit ore*; trans. Cameron, *In laudem Iustini* (n. 2 above), 108. On the same embassy, see also Menander Protector, frag. 8.

51 S. McCormack, “Latin Prose Panegyrics: Tradition and Discontinuity in the Later Roman Empire,” *REAug* 22 (1976): 29–77; eadem, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1981); Francis, “Living Icons” (n. 25 above); Pazdernik, “Paying Attention” (n. 23 above).

to the imperial power.<sup>52</sup> This function of diplomatic protocol implies that the citizens of Constantinople perceived themselves as playing a major role in the performance of diplomatic receptions, which were viewed as important public events. The fact that ambassadors had to walk through the city—and, more importantly, past throngs of its residents—toward their reception in the Great Palace illustrates the intimate involvement of the population of Constantinople in the ritual.<sup>53</sup> People were fully aware of their own importance in the grand spectacle, and they derived a great deal of satisfaction from their association with the emperor's power. At the same time, the visuals of the ambassadors and their contingents could bolster public perception of imperial power: the more exotic the envoys looked and the more magnificent their gifts were, the more awe-inspiring this ritual became and the more legitimate was imperial power.<sup>54</sup> For instance, the residents of Constantinople would have been surprised and perhaps even scared by the spectacle of giraffes and pygmies that had been sent by the king of Axum to Emperor Leo in 457.<sup>55</sup> Theophanes the Confessor described the curiosity aroused by the arrival of an Avar embassy in Constantinople in 557–58, a century later.<sup>56</sup>

52 Kertzer, *Ritual* (n. 13 above), 12–14.

53 In 869 when pontifical envoys arrived in Constantinople, they were escorted by a crowd carrying lighted candles (*Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Romanae*, 2:180); D. Nerlich, *Diplomatische Gesandtschaften zwischen Ost- und Westkaisern, 756–1002* (Bern, 1999), 202–3, 282; N. Drocourt, “Ambassadeurs étrangers à Constantinople: Moyens de contacts, d’échanges et de connaissances partielles du monde byzantin (VIII<sup>e</sup>–XII<sup>e</sup> siècles),” in *Espaces d’échanges en Méditerranée: Antiquité et Moyen Âge*, ed. F. Clément, J. Tolan, and J. Wilgaux (Rennes, 2006), 107–34.

54 On *Akzeptanztheorie* see E. Flaig, “Für eine Konzeptionalisierung der Usurpation im spätrömischen Reich,” in *Usurpationen in der Spätantike*, ed. F. Paschoud and J. Szidat (Stuttgart, 1997), 15–34; H. U. Wiemer, “*Voces populi*: Akklamationen als Surrogat politischer Partizipation im spätrömischen Reich,” in *Genesis und Dynamiken der Mehrheitsentscheidung*, ed. E. Flaig (Munich, 2013), 173–202. On the political role of the population of Constantinople, see A. Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome* (Cambridge, MA, 2015).

55 Damascius, *Vita Isidori* 4.761.3.

56 Theoph. 6050. Even much later, Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus in his *De administrando imperio* was aware of the symbolic and political meaning of extravagant gifts, and he also stressed their importance; on gifts from the emperor to the barbarians, see *De adm.* 1.1.16–2.4; 2.4.8–13; on gifts from the barbarians to the emperor, see *De adm. Proem.* 38–39; on the gift-giving process

It is exactly what Eusebius of Caesarea had depicted in the *Vita Constantini*:

There were constant diplomatic visitors who brought valuable gifts from their homelands, so that when we ourselves happened to be present we saw before the outer palace gates waiting in a line remarkable figures of barbarians, with their exotic dress, their distinctive appearance, the quite singular cut of hair and beard; the appearance of their hairy faces was foreign and astonishing; their bodily height exceptional. The faces of some were red, others whiter than snow, of others blacker than ebony or pitch, and others had a mixed colour in between; for men of Blemmyan race, and Indian and Ethiopian, “who are twain-parted last of men,” could be seen in recounting those mentioned. Each of these in turn, as in a picture, brought their particular treasures to the Emperor, some of them golden crowns, some diadems of precious stones, others fair-haired children, others foreign cloths woven with gold and bright colours; others horses, others shields and long spears and javelins and bows; showing that they were offering service and alliance with these things to the Emperor when he required it.<sup>57</sup>

in late antiquity, see A. Becker, “La girafe et la clepsydre: Offrir des cadeaux diplomatiques dans l’Antiquité tardive,” *Monde(s)* 5 (2014): 27–42; Nechaeva, *Embassies* (n. 10 above), 163–205; and on the same process from 800 to 1200, see P. Schreiner, “Diplomatische Geschenke zwischen Byzanz und dem Westen ca. 800–1200: Eine Analyse der Texte mit Quellenanhang,” *DOP* 58 (2004): 252–82; F. A. Bauer, “Potentieller Besitz: Geschenke im Rahmen des byzantinischen Kaiserzeremoniells,” in *Visualisierung von Herrschaft: Frühmittelalterliche Residenzen—Gestalt und Zeremoniell*, ed. Bauer (Istanbul, 2006), 135–69.

57 Euseb., *Vita Const.* 4.7.1–2 (SC 559:462–64): Συνεχῆς γοῦν ἀπανταχόθεν οἱ διαπρεσβευόμενοι δῶρα τὰ παρ’ αὐτοῖς πολυτελῆ διεκόμεζον, ὡς καὶ αὐτοὺς ποτε παρατυχόντας ἡμᾶς πρὸ τῆς αὐλείου τῶν βασιλείων πυλῶν στοιχηδὸν ἐν τάξει περιβλεπτα σχήματα βαρβάρων ἐστῶτα θεάσασθαι, οἷς ἑξάλλος μὲν ἡ στολή, διαλλάττων δ’ ὁ τῶν σχημάτων τρόπος, κόμη τε κεφαλῆς καὶ γενείου πάμπλου διεστῶσα, βλοσυρῶν τε ἦν προσώπων βάρβαρος καὶ καταπληκτικὴ τις ὄψις, σωματῶν θ’ ἡλικίας ὑπερβάλλοντα μεγέθη· καὶ οἷς μὲν ἐρυθραίνετο τὰ πρόσωπα, οἷς δὲ λευκότερα χιόνος ἦν, οἷς δ’ ἐβένου καὶ πίττης μελάντερα, οἱ δὲ μέσης μετεῖχον κρᾶσεως, ἐπεὶ καὶ Βλεμμύων γέννη Ἰνδῶν τε καὶ Αἰθιοπῶν, οἱ διχθὰ δεδαίεται ἔσχατοι ἀνδρῶν, τῇ τῶν εἰρημένων ἐθεωρεῖτο ἱστορία. ἐν μέρει δὲ τούτων ἕκαστοι, ὥσπερ ἐν πίνακος γραφῇ, τὰ παρ’ αὐτοῖς τίμια βασιλεῖ προσεκόμεζον, οἱ μὲν στεφάνους χρυσοῦς, οἱ δ’ ἐκ λίθων διαδήματα τιμίων,



For the bishop of Caesarea the embassies described were clearly a living proof of the omnipotence of imperial power, which was already fully proclaimed by public monuments claiming that the emperor ruled universally and victoriously thanks to God.<sup>58</sup> One telling example is the equestrian statue of Justinian on the columnar monument on the Augustaion. When the ambassadors would arrive through the *regia* at the Great Palace, they would go near the Augustaion, where this column was the largest monument. When Procopius described it in his *Buildings*, he mentioned that the only weapon held by the emperor was the Christian cross, symbolizing his alliance with God:

And in his left hand he holds a globe, by which the sculptor signifies that the whole earth and sea are subject to him, yet he has neither sword nor spear nor any other weapon, but a cross stands upon the globe which he carries, the emblem by which alone he has obtained both his Empire and his victory in war.<sup>59</sup>

The embassies were a living illustration of the ideological message carried by the equestrian statue, which symbolized the imperial capacity to protect and to defend the city thanks to God.<sup>60</sup>

ἄλλοι ξανθοκόμους παῖδας, οἱ δὲ χρυσῶ καὶ ἄνθεσι καθυφασμένους βαρβαρικὰς στολὰς, οἱ δ' ἵππους, οἱ δ' ἄσπιδας καὶ δόρατα μακρὰ καὶ βέλη καὶ τόξα, τὴν διὰ τούτων ὑπηρεσίαν τε καὶ συμμαχίαν βουλομένῳ βασιλεῖ παρέχειν ἐνδεικνύμενοι. Trans. A. Cameron, *Life of Constantine* (Oxford, 1999), 155–56.

58 F. A. Bauer, “Urban Space and Ritual: Constantinople in Late Antiquity,” *ActaIRNorv* 15, n.s., 1 (2001): 27–61; M. Meier, “Göttliche Kaiser und christliche Herrscher? Die christlichen Kaiser der Spätantike und ihre Stellung zu Gott,” *Das Altertum* 48 (2003): 129–60.

59 Procopius, *Buildings* 1.2.11–12: καὶ φέρει μὲν χειρὶ τῇ λαίᾳ πόλον, παραδηλῶν ὁ πλάστης ὅτι γῆ τε αὐτῶ καὶ θάλασσα δεδούλωται πᾶσα, ἔχει δὲ οὕτε ξίφος οὕτε δοράτιον οὕτε ἄλλο τῶν ὅπλων οὐδέν, ἀλλὰ σταυρὸς αὐτῶ ἐπὶ τοῦ πόλου ἐπίκειται, δι' οὗ δὴ μόνου τὴν τε βασιλείαν καὶ τὸ τοῦ πολέμου πεπóρισται κράτος; On *Buildings*, trans. H. B. Dewing, Loeb 343 (Cambridge, MA–London, 1940), 34 (Greek text), 35 (translation).

60 On this column see F. A. Bauer, *Stadt, Platz und Denkmal in der Spätantike: Untersuchungen zur Ausstattung des öffentlichen Raums in den spätantiken Städten Rom, Konstantinopel und Ephesos* (Mainz, 1996), 154–67; D. Feissel, “Les édifices de Justinien au témoignage de Procope et de l'épigraphie,” *AntTard* 8 (2000): 181–204, at 90.

At another level, the consistory's members were also involved in the reception of the ambassadors at the moment when the latter would enter into the sacred space of the Great Palace. During diplomatic receptions, envoys took part in the representation of divine hierarchy on Earth, becoming important actors in the protocol. First, when the ambassadors would advance into the midst of the *scholae palatinae*, they were preceded by the Roman dignitaries summoned for the *silentium*.<sup>61</sup> The aim of this performance of the palatine services in their entirety was, of course, to impress the ambassadors; but at the same time, it was also a way to make the dignitaries aware of the importance of the event and, in some ways, to make themselves feel a part of it. Besides, the curtains seemed to isolate the ambassadors waiting in the *anteconsistorium* from the space of the Consistorium, where all the actors of Roman protocol, the emperor and the dignitaries, were assembled together. Then, after the curtains had been raised, the dignitaries—wearing their ceremonial clothes and their insignia—would exalt the imperial glory, which in turn would reflect on them.<sup>62</sup> To consolidate his power, the emperor could use diplomatic receptions to associate the dignitaries with the protocol. In return, to ensure their own prominent place within the empire, the dignitaries would recognize imperial legitimacy. Once it is made incontestable, from a Bourdieusian perspective one could say that they would testify that the emperor was allowed to speak legitimately on behalf of the group of which he was the authorized representative.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, the performance would also remind them of the preeminence of imperial power.

In this respect, the ritualized performance of diplomatic protocol at the court of Constantinople was intended to persuade the people of Constantinople and the dignitaries that imperial power legitimately reigned supreme. Yet this legitimacy could sometimes be called into question by the behavior of barbarian envoys during the diplomatic reception.

61 Corippus, *In laud. Iust.* 3.160–80; *De cer.* 404.19–405.2 (CSHB 16:404–5).

62 Pazdernik, “Paying Attention” (n. 23 above).

63 P. Bourdieu, “Le langage autorisé: Note sur les conditions sociales de l'efficacité du discours rituel,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 1 (1975): 183–90, at 183; idem, “Les rites comme actes d'institution” (n. 27 above), 101.

## Ambassadors Facing Imperial Nonverbal Communication

That the emperor employed various levels of diplomatic communication suggests that, for their part, the foreign ambassadors were capable of understanding the codes of imperial protocol regardless of their ethnic origin. Theoretically, Avar, Hunnic, Saracen, or Persian envoys seemed to have been formally received in the same way by the emperor, with the same prescriptive structure of protocol as described by Peter the Patrice applied to all of them.<sup>64</sup> But by playing with nonverbal communication and by manipulating protocol, the emperor was able to send various messages to the envoys, showing them his respect or, more often, his aim to undermine them. In either case, the envoys should have been able to decrypt the nonverbal communication. According to the Roman sources themselves, envoys were familiar enough with the protocol to be able to understand imperial manipulations and react to them. This was certainly the case for the Persian envoys, who visited the imperial court regularly from the third century onward.<sup>65</sup> However, it appears to have been the case as well for foreign envoys sent by other kings,<sup>66</sup> as demonstrated, for instance, by the marked reaction of a Saracen envoy in 568. In this highly unusual case, Emperor Justin II decided to receive the envoy alone, without his normal retinue. But the Saracen envoy refused to follow this change in protocol, arguing that it was against the diplomatic tradition, given that the previous envoys had been allowed to bring their retinues.

For he [Justin] knew that the envoy out of pride would refuse to approach the Emperor without his followers, but just as when the Saracen envoys had come before Justinian with all their companions, he would wish to do the same and maintain the custom. Thus Justin thought that he would be able to argue plausibly that he had

acted as befits an Emperor while the Saracen did not know what was proper, and he would be able to throw the blame upon the barbarian. It turned out just as the Emperor had intended. For the Saracen considered that it was inappropriate to go before the Emperor alone and that he should not choose to break past practice, and so he turned down the summons.<sup>67</sup>

The Saracen envoy understood very clearly that if he accepted such a change, he would be humiliated. Indeed, by attempting to change the protocol, Emperor Justin failed to respect what Menander called the “sacred law of friendship,” το τῆς φιλίας θεσμός, or the *ius gentium* that ruled the ritual and protocol of diplomatic relations and was theoretically respected by all who participated in Romano-barbarian diplomacy.<sup>68</sup>

Even a new ambassador arriving for the first time needed to know the protocol; he was probably accompanied by a more experienced colleague already familiar with it, in large part because inexperience could have fatal consequences. Envoys’ personal experience was indeed crucially important.<sup>69</sup> For instance, as described

67 Menander Protector, frag. 9.3.53–65: Ἡπίστατο γὰρ ὡς ἀπαυθα- διαζόμενος οὐκ ἂν ἔλοιτο ἄνευ τῶν οἱ ἐπομένων ὡς βασιλέα φοιτῆσαι, ἀλλ’ ὥσπερ ἡνίκα παρὰ Ἰουστινιανὸν ξὺν ἅπασιν τοῖς ἅμα αὐτοῖς τῶν Σαρακηνῶν οἱ πρέσβεις ἐγίνοντο, καὶ τὸν οὕτω βούλεσθαι τὸ σύνθη- θες διασώζοντα ποιῆσειν. Ἐντεῦθεν τε εὐπρόσωπον ᾤετο ἔξιν αἰτίαν, ὡς αὐτὸς μὲν τὰ ἀρμόδια βασιλεῖ διεπράξατο, ὁ δὲ Σαρακηνὸς ἥκι- στα ἔγνω τὰ δέοντα· εἶτα κατὰ δὴ τοῦ βαρβάρου ἀντιστραφῆσεται τὸ ἐπικύλημα. Καὶ οὐκ [ἂν] ἄλλως ἀπέβη ἢ βασιλεὺς ἐστοχάσατο. Ὁ γὰρ δὴ Σαρακηνὸς ἀπρεπὲς εἶναι τὸ παρῆναι οἱ μόνῳ ὡς βασιλέα ὑποτοπι- σας, καὶ τὸ κρατῆσαν δῆθεν καταλύειν οὐχ αἰρετέον αὐτῷ, ἀπηνήνατο τὴν ἐς βασιλέα πάροδον. Trans. Blockley, *Menander* (n. 3 above), 107.

68 Menander Protector, frag. 12.4; also Priscus, frag. 11.2; Zos. 2.47.2. According to B. Paridisi, *Storia del diritto internazionale del medio evo*, vol. 1 (Milan, 1940), 184, barbarians are responsible for the disappearance of the ambassadors’ immunity. Cf. Nechaeva, *Embassies* (n. 10 above), 62–65; A. Becker, “L’inviolabilité de l’ambassadeur et le *ius gentium* dans une diplomatie romaine en mutation (V<sup>e</sup> siècle),” in *Thémis en diplomatie: Droit et arguments juridiques dans les relations internationales de l’Antiquité tardive à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. N. Drocourt and E. Schnakenbourg (Rennes, 2016), 193–208.

69 For instance, the Persian envoys Isdigousnas (envoy in 547–48, 550, 557, 561–62, and 567; *PLRE* 3:722–23) and later Mebod (envoy in 567, 574–75, 576–77, 579, and 586; *PLRE* 3:868–70), who both undertook multiple embassies to Constantinople, or the Avar envoy Targitis, sent at least four times to Constantinople (envoy in 565, 569, 579, and 584; *PLRE* 3:1217). A. D. Lee, *Information and Frontiers: Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1993),

64 In contrast, the receptions of envoys from the Western part of the Empire had some procedural differences; Gillett, *Envoys and Political Communication* (n. 9 above), 226–27. For the prescriptive model given by Constantin VII in the eleventh century for receiving foreign envoys, see *De cer.* 566.11–570.10 (CSHB 16:566–70).

65 Canepa, *Two Eyes* (n. 6 above), 122–53.

66 In any case, the master of ceremonies informed and explained to the envoys how they were supposed to act during the reception so that they might avoid misbehavior.

by Priscus, Esclas, who was already Rua's envoy before he became Attila's envoy to the imperial court, was very familiar with Roman diplomatic protocol, because he had been sent to Constantinople many times.<sup>70</sup> To successfully navigate diplomatic receptions, envoys needed to be acculturated enough to be able to choose skillfully from among various tools of communication, including nonverbal cues; their own dress, the size of their retinue, the nature of the gifts they bore for the emperor—all these were as meaningful and as important as the diplomatic message they carried. Even what Roman sources described as arrogance can be seen as a means of offsetting the imbalance of force produced by Roman protocol. As a matter of fact, foreign envoys are usually described by Roman sources as rhetorically aggressive. Of course, from the Roman point of view, this aggressiveness was a *topos*; but from the barbarian point of view, such behavior was essential to maintain a certain balance of power during the performance of reception, otherwise dominated by the Romans.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, the envoys shared a common diplomatic culture, including a set of common rules employed during diplomatic receptions: one of the most significant was the respect theoretically shared by Romans and barbarians for the *ius gentium*. At the same time, regardless of their ethnic origins, foreign envoys could employ the skills acquired during their previous diplomatic experiences to understand the performance

of imperial diplomatic ritual and the message sent to them by nonverbal communication during imperial receptions.

In their meetings with the emperor, envoys could sometimes use nonverbal communication in even more subtle ways. One very telling example is the humiliation suffered by Theodosius II in the year 450 while receiving the ambassadors Orestes and Esclas—sent by Attila after the discovery of a plot against himself.<sup>72</sup> These two experienced envoys appeared before Theodosius II, having performed diplomatic protocol normally. However, around his neck Orestes wore the very same money-filled purse that the emperor had previously given to the traitors who were supposed to murder Attila. In this way, they clearly indicated to the emperor, even before saying anything, that the plot had been discovered and the conspirators arrested.

He [Attila] immediately sent Orestes and Esclas to Constantinople. He ordered Orestes to go before the Emperor wearing around his neck the bag in which Vigilas had placed the gold to be given to Edeco. He was to show him and the eunuch the bag and to ask if they recognised it. Esclas was then to say directly that Theodosius was the son of a nobly-born father, and Attila, too, was of noble descent, having succeeded his father, Mundiuch. But whereas he had preserved his noble lineage, Theodosius had fallen from his and was Attila's slave, bound to payment of tribute. Therefore, in attacking him covertly like a worthless slave, he was acting unjustly towards his better, whom fortune had made his master.<sup>73</sup>

45–47; Gillett, *Envoys and Political Communication*, 235; Nechaeva, *Embassies*, 127–31.

70 Priscus, frag. 2.1–6: "Ὅτι Ῥοῦα βασιλεύοντος Οὐννων, Ἀμιλζούροις καὶ Ἰτιμάροις καὶ Τούνσουροι καὶ Βοῖσκοις καὶ ἑτέροις ἔθνεσι προσοικοῦσι τὸν Ἰστρον καὶ ἐς τὴν Ῥωμαίων ὁμαιχμίαν καταφυγάνουσιν ἐς μάχην ἐλθεῖν προηρημένος ἐκπέμπει Ἡσλαν εἰωθότα ἐπὶ τοῖς διαφόροις αὐτῷ τε καὶ Ῥωμαίοις διακονεῖσθαι, λύειν τὴν προὔπαρχουσιν εἰρήνην ἀπειλῶν, εἰ μὴ γε πάντας τοὺς παρὰ σφᾶς καταφυγόντας ἐκδοῖεν." "When Rua was king of the Huns, the Amilzuri, Itimari, Toundsoures, Boisci and other tribes who were living near to the Danube were fleeing to fight on the side of the Romans. Rua decided to go to war with these tribes and sent Esclas, a man who usually handled negotiations over differences between himself and the Romans, threatening to break the present peace if they did not hand over all who had fled to them" (trans. Blockley, *Fragmentary Historians* [n. 3 above], 225). Also Priscus, frags. 11.1.1–5; 15.2.3–4. In contrast B. Croke, "Dynasty and Aristocracy in the Fifth Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, ed. M. Maas (Cambridge, 2015), 98–124, at 122–23, downplays the role played by Hunnic envoys and their ability to deal with Roman emperors.

71 For instance Amm. 26.5.7; on the same issue in later periods, see Drocourt, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* (n. 4 above), 571–84.

72 In 449 the chamberlain Chrysaphius formed a plot to murder Attila, persuading the Hunnic envoy Edeco to take part in the conspiracy. However, as soon as he was back from Constantinople, Edeco told Attila all about it (Priscus, frags. 11.1; 11.2.126–31).

73 Priscus, frag. 15.2.2–14: παρευθὺ ἔπεμπεν Ὀρέστην καὶ Ἡσλαν ὁ Ἀττήλας ἐς τὴν Κωνσταντίνου ἐντειλόμενος τὸν μὲν Ὀρέστην τὸ βαλλάντιον, ἐν ᾧ περ ἐμβεβλήκει Βιγίλας τὸ χρυσίον τὸ Ἐδέκῳ δοθησόμενον, τῷ σφετέρῳ περιθέντα τραχήλῳ ἐλθεῖν τε παρὰ βασιλέα καὶ αὐτῷ ἐπιδείξαντα καὶ τῷ εὐνούχῳ ἀνερωτᾶν, εἴ γε αὐτὸ ἐπιγινώσκουσιν, τὸν δὲ Ἡσλαν λέγειν ἀπὸ στόματος εὐ μὲν γεγονότος εἶναι πατὴρ τὸν Θεοδοσίον παιδα, εὐ δὲ καὶ αὐτὸν φύντα καὶ τὸν πατέρα Μουνδίουχον διαδεξάμενον διαφυλάττει τὴν εὐγένειαν· ταύτης δὲ τὸν Θεοδοσίον ἐκπεπτακότα δουλεύειν αὐτῷ τὴν τοῦ φόρου ἀπαγωγὴν ὑφίστάμενον. Οὐ δίκαιον οὖν ποιεῖ τῷ βελτίονι καὶ δν αὐτῷ ἢ τυχὴ δεσπότην

The ambassadors of the Hunnic king delivered a very strong nonverbal message by playing with a contradiction whose aim was to make the imperial court feel uncomfortable at the beginning of the reception: while they fully respected the formal rules of diplomatic protocol—or, more precisely, they pretended to show respect, in a kind of pseudo-spontaneous display, at least until they made the proskynesis—at the same time the bag carried by Orestes was the very proof that the plot against Attila had failed.

When the envoys addressed the emperor after the proskynesis, however, they made no further pretense. From that moment on, they followed their own script and used the formal rules to their advantage, reversing all the protocol's symbolic elements. They thereby demonstrated that they were not subject to protocol or to the emperor anymore. Instead of reacting to any imperial manipulation of protocol, they acted. For instance, by asking the emperor if he recognized the bag, Orestes gave him no other choice than to remain silent. In that interaction, the nature of the imperial silence changed: no longer a holy silence, it was now a guilty human one. Also very important was the symbolic meaning of the bag, which apparently was the only "gift" carried by the envoys. Whereas diplomatic gifts were usually a source of symbolic capital, as part of the gift-giving mechanism between two political powers,<sup>74</sup> in this case the envoys reversed the process: rather than attempting to improve the symbolic capital of their king, they gave what Pierre Bourdieu called "bad-faith gifts."<sup>75</sup> By giving the

bag, which was the very symbol of the emperor's loss of symbolic capital, they effectively denied him the right to take part in any gift-giving process. And that was exactly what Esclas verbalized in his aggressive speech, when he said that Theodosius II had fallen from his lineage and compared him to a slave—by definition, a person without any symbolic capital.

Of course, one cannot be sure that what Priscus wrote exactly reproduced the speech given by Esclas. However, even a rewritten speech would indicate that Priscus perfectly understood the symbolic meaning of the bag.

A final point concerns the role played by Orestes in this diplomatic reception and in Hunnic diplomacy more generally. Orestes was by birth a Roman aristocrat from Pannonia, a province ceded to Attila by Aetius in 433.<sup>76</sup> Around 449 he entered the service of Attila,<sup>77</sup> but his familial ties to the Western part of the Empire remained significant. Thus, his father Tatulus took part in the delegation sent by Aetius to Attila in 449, accompanying the official envoys Promotus, governor of Noricum; the general Romanus; and Orestes' father-in-law, Count Romulus.<sup>78</sup> Attila trusted him nonetheless. His political allegiance appeared so obvious and strong that Theodosius II and his chamberlain Chrysaphius did not try to draw him into the plot against Attila, even though he was one of the king's envoys, preferring instead to involve the Hun Edeko.<sup>79</sup> Knowing the imperial court rules perfectly, Orestes could advise Attila on how to cope with them. It is probably no coincidence that Attila's diplomatic claims changed after the arrival of Orestes, becoming more symbolically and psychologically aggressive. For instance, in 449, in addition to his usual assertions about the respecting of treaties, Attila demanded that Roman envoys be consuls. Judging by the answer of Theodosius II, the symbolism of this new claim was unacceptable to the Romans, as Orestes

ἀνέδειξεν ὡς πονηρὸς οἰκέτης λαθριδίως ἐπιτιθέμενος. Trans. Blockley, *Fragmentary Historians*, 297.

74 For a comprehensive review of the sociological analysis of gift giving, see O. Pyyhtinen, *The Gift and Its Paradoxes: Beyond Mauss* (Farnham, 2014); M. Osteen, "Questions of the Gift," in *The Question of the Gift: Essays across Disciplines*, ed. Osteen (London, 2002), 1–42. On gift giving in medieval history, see A. Cutler, "Les échanges de dons entre Byzance et l'Islam (IX<sup>e</sup>–XI<sup>e</sup> siècles)," *JSav* 1 (1996): 51–66; idem, "Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab, and Related Economies," *DOP* 55 (2001): 247–78; E. Magnani, "Les médiévistes et le don: Avant et après la théorie maussienne," *Revue du MAUSS* 31 (2008): 525–44; Nechaeva, *Embassies*, 163–205; Drocourt, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore*, 545–62.

75 According to P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1977), 5–6, and idem, *Raisons pratiques: Sur la théorie de l'action* (Paris, 1994), 179–81, gifts are bad-faith gestures because they are given in order to obtain a reciprocal gift: the donor denies this obligation, thereby sustaining the fiction of spontaneous, disinterested giving in order to increase his symbolic capital. For a definition of "symbolic capital," see Bourdieu, "Espace

social" (n. 27 above), 3. On Pierre Bourdieu's theory, see I. F. Silber, "Bourdieu's Gift to Gift Theory: An Unacknowledged Trajectory," *Sociological Theory* 27 (2009): 173–90.

76 Priscus, frag. 11.1.2–5.

77 Anonymus Valensianus 8.38.

78 Croke, "Dynasty and Aristocracy in the Fifth Century," 120, erroneously states that Orestes was a member of this delegation (Priscus, frag. 11.2.321–22).

79 See note 72.



necessarily would have known.<sup>80</sup> One can imagine that he suggested the main steps of the script that he and Eslas followed at the imperial court. In fact he used his Roman cultural background, his Romanness, in the service of his political allegiance to Attila.<sup>81</sup> And as part of a Roman aristocratic network functioning as an unofficial diplomatic channel, he could have been a useful mediator for resolving diplomatic issues when disagreements arose between King Attila and Western Roman envoys at Attila's court. The composition of the Western embassy sent by Aetius to Attila—especially the attendance of Orestes' father and father-in-law—demonstrates the importance of this network. But Orestes' political loyalty to Attila was never been put into question in the sources,<sup>82</sup> nor was the political loyalty of other provincial aristocrats to other barbarian kings such as Leo of Narbonne at Euric's court or Syagrius at the Burgundian court.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, all of them, by drawing on their Roman cultural background when they advised barbarian kings, blurred the distinction between *romanitas* and *barbaritas*.

Eventually, after Eslas delivered his aggressive speech, Emperor Theodosius was unable to rebalance the political relationship.<sup>84</sup> In effect, the nature of the reception itself changed: it became at the same time a dialectical and a dialogical process, as the emperor and his counselors tried to find a diplomatic solution. This was a very important success for Orestes and Eslas because, thanks to their capacity for playing with

nonverbal communication, they initiated a change that called into question the entire imperial ideology rooted in diplomatic protocol. For the emperor, the consequences of such a challenge could be extremely serious. The account of Priscus highlights very clearly how the imperial protocol could affect internal politics. After suffering diplomatic humiliation in the presence of his court, Emperor Theodosius II, "being mortified," found his legitimacy and power weakened.<sup>85</sup>



Applying an anthropological framework to the sources of the fifth and the sixth centuries is a way to overcome, as far as possible, the narrative strategies of the sources and, thus, to highlight the ritual nature of diplomatic receptions. Even if ancient authors preferred, for various reasons well articulated by Walter Pohl,<sup>86</sup> to underplay the ritual aspects of these encounters, from an anthropological perspective it is clear that nonverbal communication—the use of space as well as of time—was a critical aspect of, and even framed, the

80 Priscus, frag. 11.1.14–18, for Attila's claim; frag. 11.2.13–20, for the imperial answer.

81 J. P. Conant, "Romanness in the Age of Attila," in Maas, *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila* (n. 70 above), 156–72.

82 Cf. M. A. Babcock, *The Night Attila Died* (New York, 2005), 233, who states that "Orestes nurtured a secret allegiance to Rome" without giving any evidence for this claim.

83 Sidonius Apollinaris, *Ep.* 4.22, on the role of advisor played by Leo of Narbonne at the Visigothic court; *Ep.* 5.5, on the role of advisor played by Syagrius at the Burgundian court.

84 C. Kelly, *Attila the Hun: Barbarian Terror and the Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 2008), 162–63, states that the two ambassadors were received not by Theodosius himself but only by the *magister officiorum*. But there is no evidence for such a claim. And even if we accept Kelly's explanation, Orestes would have passed through the city to the Great Palace wearing the bag, which was a humiliation for the emperor. In the view of P. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford, 2006), 323–24, there is no doubt that the two ambassadors appeared before Theodosius carrying the bag.

85 Priscus, frag. 15.2.23. This ability of foreign envoys to play with protocol was also confirmed in the later foreign narratives. For instance, Nasr ibn Al-Azhar managed to overcome the imbalance of force by refusing to change his clothing and by keeping his weapons when he went to the diplomatic reception. Faced with this theatrical attitude, Emperor Michel III had no choice but to ask him to come back (Tabari, *Hist.* 3:1450); Y. Friedman, *Encounter between Enemies: Captivity and Ransom in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Leiden, 2002), 37. The most problematic part of the ceremonial, however, would likely have been the proskynesis, which Muslim envoys seemed to try not to perform, as the literary motif of the ambassador walking backward in the Consistorium suggests. For instance, in 839–40, during the reign of Emperor Theophilos, al-Ghazal was sent to Constantinople by the Cordoban emir Abd al-Rahman II. According to a tenth-century Spanish source, since the envoy did not want to perform the proskynesis, the door of the Consistorium was made smaller in order to make the ambassador bend over. But ultimately al-Ghazal walked into the Consistorium backward; on this point see J. Signes Codoñer, "Diplomatie und Propaganda im 9. Jahrhundert: Die Gesandtschaft des al-Ghazal nach Konstantinopel," in *Novum Millennium: Studies on Byzantine History and Culture Dedicated to Paul Speck*, ed. C. Sode and S. Takács (Aldershot, 1999), 379–92. Exactly the same story was told about al-Bāqillāni, who was sent to Constantinople by the caliph 'Adud al-Dawla in 980–81 (Ibn al-Atir 9.16.2–6); see A. Beihammer, "Die Kraft der Zeichen: Symbolische Kommunikation in der byzantinisch-arabischen Diplomatie des 10. und 11. Jahrhunderts," *JÖB* 54 (2004): 159–89, at 175–78.


86 Pohl, "Ritualized Encounters" (n. 8 above).

ritual structure of diplomatic protocol. Like all other rituals, diplomatic encounters were intricately scripted and performed but not entirely rigid. They were variable and could be altered by the emperor in response to particular situations at the imperial court of the later Roman Empire.<sup>87</sup> We cannot forget, therefore, that this protocol was a multilayered phenomenon, engaging not only with foreign diplomacy but also with the legitimacy of imperial power. During diplomatic receptions, the emperor would send an ideological message to foreign envoys as well as to his own people about his legitimacy—relying precisely on the possibility of variation—through verbal and nonverbal communication. When diplomatic receptions were successful, they made the legitimacy of imperial power seem beyond doubt. But the game could become quite dangerous, since the slightest variance by the emperor and his court in any aspect of the protocol's script could throw into question his political power. As this essay has shown, nonverbal communication was

useful not only for the emperor but also for foreign agents, who employed it both to stage themselves and to introduce small variations into the performance of diplomacy while respecting the form of diplomatic protocol. Thus the envoys of foreign kings could use nonverbal communication as a tool to respond to the imperial manipulation of protocol and to rebalance the power relation. By doing this, they questioned the ritual symbolism that translated the imperial ideological claims of being a cosmic power into reality. Thus, they compelled the emperor to think about their kings as being real political powers and real diplomatic interlocutors.

Université de Lorraine  
Centre de Recherche  
Universitaire Lorrain  
d'Histoire  
UFR Sciences Humaines et  
Sociales – Ile du Saulcy  
BP 60228 – 57045 Metz Cedex 01  
France  
audrey.becker@univ-lorraine.fr

87 Peter the Patrician was aware of this point: *De cer.* 417.8–12 (CSHB 16:417).

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